Such A Good Woman

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Such A Good Woman

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Lottie's Market Basket was more than a grocery store. A meeting place, a wailing wall, a place to borrow, Lottie was always there, the good listener with an open purse. She knew all the gossip and called all the local politicians by their first names so she could, when the occasion arose, do you a favor. Campaign posters plastered the store windows and every charity drive was represented. After school, children pressed against the candy counter and found their pennies garnered more than at any other store. When the small bell over the door gave warning of a customer, Lottie would call a greeting, her unlined face stretched into a smile. Above the counter, her body appeared small and dainty, but when she hobbled out to teeter awkwardly between the helter-skelter stacks of crates around the store, her heavy bottom rocked.

Cover Page Footnote
Appeared in the issue: 1975.

This prose is available in The Angle: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1975/iss1/8
Lottie’s Market Basket was more than a grocery store. A meeting place, a wailing wall, a place to borrow, Lottie was always there, the good listener with an open purse. She knew all the gossip and called all the local politicians by their first names so she could, when the occasion arose, do you a favor. Campaign posters plastered the store windows and every charity drive was represented. After school, children pressed against the candy counter and found their pennies garnered more than at any other store. When the small bell over the door gave warning of a customer, Lottie would call a greeting, her unlined face stretched into a smile. Above the counter, her body appeared small and dainty, but when she hobbled out to teeter awkwardly between the helter-skelter stacks of crates around the store, her heavy bottom rocked.

The girl had never told her real name. There was no point. It wouldn’t have meant anything to Lottie, but it might have meant something to her family if it got into the papers, so she was only Zell, a name, like the human being, at the end of the alphabet. How the girl came there, or from where, no one knew, and Lottie never said, but they lived in the rear of the store where Lottie had a comfortable apartment, crowded with stray cats and dogs, and sometimes stray human beings. But with Zell it was different; Zell she took to her heart. For a time there was talk in that conservative neighborhood: was it a mother-daughter relationship or something “strange,” but soon, like everything else about Lottie, it was accepted.

Zell kept herself mumbled most of the time, a small gnome-like creature who sat on a stool with her favorite cat Muff in her arms. Through vague eyes she surveyed the customers as they came and went, never stirring to help no matter how busy Lottie was. Sometimes she talked, sometimes she was silent; sometimes what she said was gibberish, sometimes it made sense. On Zell’s better days, when her eyes were clear and her hands didn’t shake, she allowed Lottie to brush her boyish hair out of her eyes. Zell, too, usually wore slacks and had it not been for the freshness of her skin, it would have been hard to tell whether Zell was a girl or a boy.

When Zell was in the mood, no one could be pleasanter, and she had a way of cadging a dollar bill or two from customers when Lottie’s back was turned. Later, when Zell came home staggering, with a paper bag under her arm, Lottie would swear that if she found out who’d given Zell the money for the booze, she’d never set foot in the store again. Zell could have taken it from Lottie’s cash register, which was never closed, and customers dipped into it to make their own change when Lottie was too busy. Lottie trusted everyone. Yet, somehow, I don’t think Zell ever got her booze that way.

I got to know Lottie and Zell a little better than I might have in the usual course of things, because I was a professional social worker, a psychiatric social worker, but one of those, I confess, skeptical not only of the psychiatric and the social, but of the profession. I did my job; I don’t mean that — in fact, I worked harder at it than most, but I had long ago learned that mankind and womankind were a recalcitrant breed and I came from a long line of Calvinists who didn’t believe you could do much to change them, at least not in this world. When the days came that
Zell needed drying out. Lottie would come to me and I'd help to get Zell into some hospital or nursing home that specialized in doing just that. Oh, they advertised “cures,” which Lottie was ready enough to believe in, though I warned her often enough that there probably was no such thing, and Zell would smirk and snicker whenever anyone mentioned “the cure” or even a cure.

When someone in the neighborhood asked Lottie if she'd take a man into the extra room she had out back which had been a catch-all, she thought it might help pay for the mounting hospital bills when periodically Zell had to be dried out. Courtenay was everything Lottie was not: meticulous, with a quick mind, he was a small man who fluttered about like a sparrow, waving his arms as if he might fly, as out of place in that grocery store as an operatic tenor in a burlesque show, or perhaps vice versa, a burlesque comic in an opera, I don't know which. His job of bartender at a nearby restaurant, he told one and all, was temporary, and he worked hard to give the impression that he had descended from better things.

The spare room was cleaned — even Lottie took pride in showing it off — and Courtenay moved in, bag and baggage. Soon his possessions overflowed into her small sitting-room, and before long, he made no distinction between discussing his properties and Lottie's. His hours were such that he had time to help in the store, and for once the shelves and the stock took on an order and neatness. He served customers in a large white apron and soon Lottie had discarded the ballooning slacks, the once spattered blouse was covered by an apron and changed daily, and her spaghetti-wisp hair was brushed into a tight knot on the top of her head.

Zell Courtenay treated as if she were litter. “Out of my way! Off your fat ass!” were the usual comments when he had to go by or around her, and Lottie seemed deaf and dumb. Only when Courtenay had to be bartending did Zell seem to emerge from the shadows. Courtenay strutted like a pouter pigeon, chatting with any one who'd spend the time of day with him. He'd point to the improvements he'd made in the store, Lottie generally nodding her agreement behind him, and complain about the rigors of his bartending job, until one day Lottie reported to me that he'd quit the restaurant and was going to work with her full time.

The store, though organized, now became crowded with other merchandise that Courtenay wished to sell and every now and then I heard some customer joke about the place becoming a variety store. The day I first heard someone say that, Zell was half-asleep in her corner, a shadow in the shadows, yet I could have sworn I heard her say, “Variety. You said it. All sorts of queens around here.”

Lottie had always been frugal, old-fashioned in the way she boasted that she owed no one. Then, one day, having managed to get a fifteen-dollar-a-month increase for two seventy-year-old sisters who lived in the neighborhood and who were getting sick because they didn't have enough money to buy food, I came in to the store to get them some ground meat — the paperwork took a little longer than their malnutrition could bear — and I saw Courtenay drive a bright blue Cadillac up to the door. The sun reflected from his gold inlays. Lottie stood there squinting, brushing the hair out of her eyes, and mildly protesting, “You shouldn't have, Courtenay. I don't have that kind of money.”

“Time you spent a little on yourself. No one lives forever.”

Zell leaned past Lottie and spilt across the windshield.

Courtenay sneered and pulled Lottie into the Cadillac beside him and they drove off together leaving Zell standing next to me on the sidewalk, mumbling to the cat in her arms, “Muff, Muff…”

Now, on the occasions I came to the store, to buy things or to listen to the local gossip, which told me more of what I needed to know for my “profession” than my supervisor thought any “caseworker” should know, Courtenay was always telling people that Zell had to be put away, for her own sake, if not for the sake of the store. She was driving customers away and driving him crazy. If Lottie heard, she acted dumb and when Courtenay left the liquor shelves unlocked, or no longer checked the bottles, she looked away. Courtenay had had a large sign, “Closed,” made which he hung on the front door when he and Lottie went driving in the Cadillac, but when I looked in, I always saw Zell sitting there, Muff in her lap, a bottle in her hand. When I said something to Lottie, sharply, because I knew that if that went on I'd soon be called on for another “milk farm,” Lottie was apologetic, explaining that Zell was alone a lot more and maybe the liquor was a compensation.

In the old days, at Christmas time, Lottie always had a bowl of Christmas punch and slices of fruitcake for anyone who stopped by, but Courtenay made fun of the idea, so again, instead, the “Closed” sign hung on the door, but Lottie couldn't keep it closed. When I came in, Zell was like a child, allowing Lottie to comb her hair and fuss over her as she used to do. Courtenay was pacing the floor with evident displeasure. “You'd think the two of you had a thing going, the way you carry on. Wouldn't you, Miss Simmons?” he asked me. “You work with a lot of those headshrinkers, what do you think?”
I saw that he was serious and made a little joke about headshrinkers that made him laugh shrilly. “Good morning,” one psychiatrist says to another in the halls, and the second one reflects, “Now what did he mean by that?”

“Good thing I came along to make a woman out of you, Lottie, or who knows what would have happened?” Courtenay declared.

Zell stuck her pale tongue out at him: “You fag!” she grated.

Courtenay slapped her, the stool toppled over and Zell went sprawling across the floor. Lottie helped her up and took her into the back, and I went with her. Zell asked her to stay, held her hand, rubbed her head against her bosom, but Lottie, edgy, was anxious to leave. I sat with Zell for a while, telling her about some of my “cases” that day — without names, of course, to preserve the proper professional detachment — but she wasn’t listening. When she heard Lottie’s low laugh in the next room and Courtenay’s high-pitched one, she shook. “It’s like that all the time now,” she said in a hoarse whisper, “Me in the next room and them in the other, laughing and... laughing... and...” She couldn’t go on.

Just before New Year’s I found Zell’s cat in the front of an alleyway a few buildings down from Lottie’s. Its neck had been wrung. I carried it to the store and Zell took it from me and began to scream, “The bastard, he’s killed Muff, he’s killed Muff,” while Lottie tried to wipe the blood and fur off my coat. When Zell dropped the dead cat and began to pound Courtenay’s chest with her fists, he shoved her away and she fell against the wall. “Take your baby to bed, Lottie. She makes me sick,” he said and walked out.

From then on, I didn’t see Zell much. Lottie said she was spending more time in her room and there were more empty bottles under the bed than before. She was preparing
me to find another drying-out station. For the first time, I tried to behave like a psychiatric social worker, and I told her that she ought to send Zell away permanently, that the situation was unhealthy, that with Courtenay there, Zell had no chance whatever, that she would drink more and more and get worse and worse. But Lottie shook her head stubbornly and said not a word.

By mid-winter, Zell was in her old corner, thinner, paler, more ghostly than ever, but now when customers talked to her, what they heard was like a broken record: "He strangled Muff. He's a maniac. He wants to get rid of me too." For me, she rolled up her sleeve and showed her arms with dark bruises and scattered burns. "It's him."

Patiently Courtenay explained that she was crazy, that she got drunk, rolled out of bed, or fell, burned herself with her cigarettes when she passed out. One day, he warned, she'd set the whole place on fire and fry them all. Lottie ought to get rid of her.

In spring, Courtenay asked Lottie to marry him and the wedding took place in the neighborhood church. Zell drifted among the guests in a new dress Lottie had evidently bought her for the occasion, and Courtenay was openly affectionate to the bride, kissing her full on the lips. Not that Lottie was a typical bride, even in her blissful state. No longer young, out of place in her green satin suit with a ribbon-matching hat screwed over her hairdo, yet she seemed to walk in a dream, as if something she had always wanted had unexpectedly come her way. Between Courtenay's attacks of ardor, she caught her breath and patted the perspiration from her forehead. Already, two half-moons circled her armpits.

The honeymoon was soon over. When I came to the store, Lottie was silent or monosyllabic, and one morning she had a bruise on her forehead. When I asked what had happened, she said she'd hit her head against the door. But later Zell told me that she had heard them quarreling, blows, a heavy thud, and when she ran to the door and hammered against it, Lottie had called to her, "Go back to bed, Zell, there's nothing you can do." Soon Lottie made no effort to conceal the running argument, and the bruises and black eyes would have spoken for themselves. She watched Courtenay in a new, wary way, and one day, while I was smelling some pineapples to see if they were ripe, she said, "I won't change that will."

"I'm your husband," I heard Courtenay say, "I'll have my share, not that drunken slut."

Lottie went back to the ballooning slacks. Her body no longer bobbed with anticipation. She seemed to have little need or time to talk, and Courtenay was always around, interrupting, taking over, sometimes correcting her English as though she were a child. "She doesn't mean that," he'd say, "do you, honey?" He'd put his arm around her and she'd withdraw behind the counter, or leave and go into the back room. Courtenay took pleasure in displaying some new bauble or piece of clothing he'd bought for Lottie, but now her face would pucker and she would
plead, “Courtenay, we're in debt. Please, take them back.”

He'd kiss her full on the mouth to stop her pleading, and Zell, in the corner, would belch. She seemed to go thinner and thinner until I expected that one day she would disappear but now even Lottie seemed alarmed. The girl, she told me, had stopped eating altogether and Lottie was trying to get her to take some soup by spooning it into her mouth, but although there were more and more bottles under the bed, Zell couldn't keep any food down. “Please, Martha,” she begged me, “find me a hospital quickly. A charity one if you can.” She flushed. “I don't think I can afford much more.” I said I'd try. And I did. I found a Sisters of Charity hospital that took Zell for a while without charge, and things seemed better for Lottie.

It was a sultry July night when the police telephoned and asked me to come down to the store. Lottie had given them my name as her “doctor.” When I got there and saw it was Sergeant Kennelly I knew that he knew who and what I was. The door to the store was open, but the shades were down and the lights out. He told me that the neighbors had called in a complaint and he'd come out himself in the prow car with one of his men. The little one inside — Zell — had told him that Courtenay was trying to kill Lottie, but Lottie said it was only a television program they were listening to and Zell was drinking again.

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“What'd it look like?” I managed to ask.

Kennelly put his hand up to his eye. “She had a mouse about this size on her left one. For a small man, he must have quite a punch.”

“I'd like to punch him...”

“...who wouldn't,” Kennelly said, “but Lottie gave us a couple of Irish coffees and sent us on our way.”

It was Courtenay who called me at the office and left a message with my supervisor to come to the store. He looked at me a bit strangely when he delivered it — professional practice discouraged personal relations with “cases” — until I told him these weren't part of my case load, just friends. Then he nodded, and turned away, though I doubt he was convinced.

When I got to the store, Courtenay asked me to come into the back. Lottie was clearing the dinner dishes, Zell watched. “My lawyer's coming here in the morning to get things straightened out as they should be. Lottie says that you're the one who helped her put Zell away before.” It was a statement not a question and I waited. “I want her where she belongs. Behind barred windows and locked doors. Then there'll only be me and Lottie. Two’s company, three’s a crowd.”

I cleared my throat and muttered something about not being able to “put Zell away,” that she wasn't “insane” and that besides such things took a long while, psychiatric examinations, someone in the family to sign Zell in, and lots and lots of money.

“Not a dime?” Courtenay shouted. He spun on his heel, turning toward Zell, “You'll not get a dime. You crazy bitch!”

Still Lottie did not speak and Zell sat waiting.

“I want her out and I'm not going to spend a dime of my money to do it,” he was growling, whistling some of his sounds through his teeth. “You got her into that Sisters of Charity place free last time, do it again!”

“You don't give me orders, Mr. Courtenay,” I said in a voice he had clearly not heard from a woman in a very long time. “And I don't take them from you.”

It was then that Zell came off the stool, moving more swiftly than I could ever have imagined her able to. The ice pick had been in her belt and before either Lottie or I could intervene, she had stabbed him with it, once, twice, until I grabbed her wrist and Lottie pulled her away.

While Lottie held her, I bent to see if I could help Courtenay, but he was dead.

When I looked up, Lottie was patting Zell's shoulder, stroking her hair, and murmuring soothing sounds, and Zell was crying over and over again, “It'll be like old times, now, Lottie, won’t it? Just like old times.”

Lottie nodded, her face sagging, very old and a widow's face now and I went to call the police.